DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 267 160 UD 024 783

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TITLE The Hmong Resettlement Study Site Report: Fort Smith, Arkansas.
INSTITUTION Minnesota Univ., Minneapolis. Center for Urban and Regional Affairs.; Northwest Regional Educational Lab., Portland, Oreg.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Refugee Resettlement (DHHS), Washington, D.C.
PUB DATE 30 Apr 84
CONTRACT HHS-600-82-0251
NOTE 74p.; For related documents, see UD 024 774-784.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Acculturation; Adult Learning; *Asian Americans; Community Attitudes; Economic Development; Educational Experience; *Employment Opportunities; Employment Patterns; English (Second Language); Females; Immigrants; Job Training; Labor Market; *Land Settlement; Migration Patterns; *Refugees; Welfare Services
IDENTIFIERS *Arkansas (Fort Smith); *Hmong People

ABSTRACT

This document reports on the resettlement of Hmong refugees in Fort Smith, Arkansas: what their employment experiences have been, which resettlement efforts have been successful, and how current resettlement efforts could be altered to improve the Hmong's long-term adjustment. The report is part of a larger, national project on Hmong resettlement. Much of the data was gathered through personal interviews with Hmong and individuals working with them in Fort Smith. Section I gives general information about the area, the population, the economic base (manufacturing), employment possibilities, welfare, housing, refugee services, and the relatively positive community response to the refugees. Section II gives brief information on the size and history of the Hmong population in Fort Smith, which was estimated at approximately 296 in 1983. Section III describes employment which, while high, is low paying and entirely based on one industry (manufacturing), welfare assistance (none of the Fort Smith Hmong receive welfare); economic development (land purchases for farming); job training; education (including particular problems for Hmong girls); and adult English-as-a-second-language programs. Section IV summarizes the findings specific to the Fort Smith area, which include: (1) all Hmong in Fort Smith are there as a result of planned secondary migration; (2) there is high employment but the family incomes are low and medical expenses are a major problem; (3) there is underemployment; (4) there are insufficient opportunities for developing English proficiency and work experience; (5) the Hmong are developing plans and strategies for economic growth but are faced with very little means of acquiring capital. (CG)

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ED267160

THE HMONG RESETTLEMENT STUDY

SITE REPORT: FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS

April 30, 1984

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UD 024 783

This report has been prepared by the University of Minnesota, Center for Urban and Regional Affairs, through its Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, under a subcontract agreement with Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, Portland, Oregon.

This project has been funded with federal funds from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services under Contract No. HHS-600-82-0251. The contract, which was competitively awarded to Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory, is for a total contract amount of $222,906. The contents of this publication do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, nor does mention of organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.

PREFACE

The Hmong Resettlement Study is a national project funded by the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement. The study is the joint undertaking of Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory (Portland, Oregon), the University of Minnesota and Lao Family Community (Santa Ana, California). The major purposes of the Study are to examine closely the resettlement of Hmong refugees in the United States, focusing on the following issues:

What has been the resettlement experience of the Hmong?

- How are the Hmong faring in terms of employment, dependence, and adjustment?
- Are there areas of employment in which the Hmong have been particularly successful?
- What do resettlement workers and the Hmong regard as the major impediments to effective Hmong resettlement and self-sufficiency?
- What role does secondary migration play in the resettlement of the Hmong? What are the reasons for secondary migration among this group? What are the implications for resettlement strategies?

What resettlement efforts and economic strategies have provided effective results for the Hmong?

- How are problems being handled? What kinds of solutions are being tried, by different resettlement communities and by the Hmong themselves?
- How many and what kinds of entrepreneurial economic development projects involving the Hmong are currently in operation, e.g., farming projects, Pa ndau cooperatives? How were they developed and how successful are they?
- What kinds of Hmong employment strategies have been particularly successful?

How might current strategies be changed to result in more effective resettlement and long-term adjustment of the Hmong?

- How might resettlement be conducted differently for the Hmong? What new projects and approaches are being considered by those involved in Hmong resettlement? How would the Hmong want resettlement to be done differently?

- How can the Hmong be resettled in a way that better utilizes their strengths and unique characteristics?

- What do the Hmong want for themselves? What do Hmong view as essential for effective resettlement? What are their goals for the future? For the next generation of Hmong?

Research conducted in the project included analysis of existing data about the Hmong, compilation of information gathered through numerous informal face-to-face and telephone conversations with Hmong informants across the country (in nearly every Hmong settlement which could be identified) and on-site observations, group meetings and personal interviews with Hmong individuals and families (as well as resettlement officials, service providers and members of the host communities). On-site case studies of Hmong resettlement were conducted in seven selected cities:

Orange County, California
Fresno, California
Portland, Oregon
Minneapolis-St. Paul, Minnesota
Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas
Fort Smith, Arkansas
Providence, Rhode Island

Staff from the participating institutions worked as a team to conduct the overall project and the seven case studies:

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The results of the project are available to the public as a series of reports published by the U.S. Government Printing Office (GPO). Copies may be ordered from:

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Reports

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Executive Summary (written in Lao)
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Site Reports: Orange County, California
Fresno, California
Portland, Oregon
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B. The Fort Smith Site Study

The field work for this report was done during the period March 11-24, 1983. Two project staff members remained in Fort Smith throughout this period: Dr. Bruce Downing and Mr. John Finck. They conducted all interviews. A third project staff member, Mr. Shur Vang Vangyi, visited Fort Smith for the period March 11-14, participating in the initial group meetings, meeting with a city administrator and consulting with Hmong community leaders. Mr. Jer Y. Thao and Mr. Chang Xiong served as local consultants.

It was possible to adhere quite closely to the work plan established for community case studies. An entry meeting was held in the home of Mr. Thao on the first day of fieldwork with officers and board members of the Fort Smith Lao Family Community, fourteen in all. Downing, Finck, and Vangyi all attended; also present was Mr. Tom Ashworth, a friend and advisor of the Hmong. Jer Thao read a statement recounting the history of the Fort Smith Hmong community and outlining some of their concerns (see Appendix). Project staff described the aims and methods of our research, and there was discussion of various issues.

On the following day, all members of the Hmong community had been invited to participate in our group meetings. Thirty-five out of the fifty-five Fort Smith Hmong households were represented in the meeting with household heads, which lasted from 9:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m.; that afternoon simultaneous meetings

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A large number of persons have assisted in various ways in the study reported here, only some of whom can be recognized by name.

Mr. John Finck and Mr. Shur Vang Vangyi were the other members of the team that carried out the field work for this study in Fort Smith, in March, 1983. Mr. Finck conducted and subsequently wrote up about half of the interviews and also drafted two sections of the report. Mr. Vangyi participated in the initial meetings with the Hmong community.

Mr. Jer Y. Thao, Board Chairman of the Fort Smith branch of Lao Family Community, Inc., and Mr. Chang Xiong, another member of the Fort Smith Hmong community, served as local consultants for this study. Mr. Thao and Mr. Xiong made the arrangements for all group meetings, scheduled all appointments, selected and scheduled interpreters, collected statistics, prepared a statement read at the entry meeting (see Appendix), showed the visitors around the community, and in all served as generous hosts throughout the visit. They both read a draft of this report to check for factual accuracy, and Mr. Xiong provided additional information for the revision of the first draft. The interpreters who assisted whenever needed, in group meetings and interviews, were Ms. Mee Heu, Mr. Pao Thong Her, Mr. Xiong Heu, Mr. Thao, Mr. Xiong, and Mr. Yang Chou.

Dr. Marshall Hurlich, of the University of Washington, and Mr. Finck, as well as the Project Officer, Ms. Toyo Biddle of the Office of Refugee Resettlement, contributed many valuable suggestions for the improvement of the first draft of the report.

The present text came together with the assistance of Ms. Hursha Wier and Ms. Ellen Klanderman, who labored skillfully at the keyboard of a CPT word processor.

Central to the success of the study was the willingness of many Hmong residents of Fort Smith, as well as American refugee workers and others, to share their knowledge and their experience in resettlement. Especially appreciated was the hospitality of the many Hmong who invited us into their homes or gave up their time to attend meetings scheduled for the study.

All of the people we spoke to, both American and Hmong, were cordial and open to the members of the research team. In particular, members of the Hmong community trusted us with their histories, their fears, their hopes, and their friendship to an extent that moved us deeply.

The generous assistance of all who participated in this research is gratefully acknowledged. For whatever errors of fact or interpretation the report may contain, the author must bear sole responsibility.

Bruce T. Downing

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I. GENERAL CONTEXT: FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS

A. Setting and Climate

Fort Smith, the county seat of Sebastian County, Arkansas, is situated in a loop of the Arkansas River at the Oklahoma border. The largest city in northwestern Arkansas, Fort Smith is 158 miles from Little Rock, to the southeast, and 111 miles from Tulsa, Oklahoma, to the northwest. Situated at an altitude of 439 feet, on a broad, navigable river flowing into the Mississippi, and on the eastern edge of what was once "Indian Territory," Fort Smith describes itself as the gateway to the Southwest. Just on its outskirts sits the now deserted Fort Chaffee, once an important Army training camp and more recently the center from which 55,000 Southeast Asian refugees were dispersed throughout the U.S. The most recent residents of Fort Chaffee were the Cuban entrants of 1979-1980.

The Ozark mountains extend almost to Fort Smith from Missouri and Fayetteville on the north; to the south lie the Boston Mountains. Along the Arkansas River is a wide swath of varied farm land. The moderate climate, humidity and the terrain remind the Hmong in Fort Smith, more than most places in the U.S., of their Laotian homeland.

B. General Population

According to "Progress Report: An Economic Profile of the Fort Smith Metro Area," compiled by the Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce (March, 1982), the northwest sector of Arkansas, in which Fort Smith is located, is the fastest growing area of the state. The figures in Table 1 below (based on the publication just mentioned) demonstrates the growth of Fort Smith, Sebastian County, and the four-county Metro Area.

TABLE 1

TOTAL POPULATION GROWTH

	1960	1970	1980
City of Fort Smith	52,991	62,802	72,469
Sebastian County	66,685	79,237	94,930
Metro Area	135,110	160,421	203,269

While the Metro Area population increased by 26.7% during the decade 1970-80, the population of the city of Fort Smith proper increased by just 15% during the same period. The Fort Smith public schools enrollment has recently declined, from 13,192 in 1975-76 to 12,131 in 1980-81. The Metro Area civilian labor force was 82,000 in December 1980 and 85,250 in December 1981.

C. Other Minority Groups

Table 2 displays the number and percent distribution of the minority populations of Sebastian County, Arkansas, for 1970 and 1980. As this table shows, with the coming of the Southeast Asian refugees in 1975 the number of Asians in tne area has surpassed the number of Indians and Spanish Americans to make Asians the second largest minority in Sebastian County, after Blacks.

A Vietnamese case worker with USCC in Fort Smith estimated the present breakdown of Southeast Asian refugee populations in Fort Smith to be as follows: 2,000 Vietnamese, 600 Lao, and 200 Hmong. The Hmong leadership in Fort Smith gave their own estimate of Vietnamese and Lao as 2,300 and 1,400 respectively; they compiled an exact count of the Hmong in Fort Smith which established the

TABLE 2

MINORITY POPULATION

Sebastian County, Arkansas

Minority Status	1970		1980	
Total	79,237	100.0%	94,930	100.0%
White	74,405	93.9%	87,336	92.0%
Black	4,379	5.5%	4,916	5.2%
American Indian	313	0.4%	991	1.0%
Asian	106	0.1%	1,110	1.2%
Other races	34	*	575	0.6%
Spanish American	604	0.8%	903	1.0%
Minority Group[1]	5,436	6.9%	8,495	8.9%

[1]Sum of Spanish American and all races except white.
*Less than 0.5 percent
Source: Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce

March, 1983, Hmong population at 296. (Two more families had arrived by July, 1983.) An American informant stated that there are about 700 Vietnamese in Fort Smith and several hundred more in Van Buren (a town of 13,000 just across the river to the north). There are no Khmer.

Although the above estimates differ somewhat, the relative size of the Vietnamese, Lao, and Hmong populations is confirmed by the figures for the number of students from each ethnic group in the Fort Smith public schools. The 1983 Indochinese student enrollment, K-12, was as follows:

Vietnamese	243
Lao	212
Hmong	88
Total Indochinese	543

D. Economic Base

The Fort Smith Metro Area (SMSA) is the leading manufacturing center in Arkansas. Its manufacturing firms employ 90,000 workers. Among the major products are furniture, air-conditioning/heating units, processed foods, major appliances, glass, stained glass, oil, lumber, and wire.

The State of Arkansas (nickname: "Land of Opportunity ") is still "predominantly agricultural. Its three main crops are cotton, rice, and soybeans, grown in the east and south . . . Peaches, watermelons, tomatoes, sorghum, pecans and corn are also raised. Of the livestock industries, the most important are cattle and poultry, especially turkeys" (American Automobile Association Tour Book, 1982).

E. Employment

The leading employers in Fort Smith, according to an officer of the Arkansas Employment Service, are shown in Table 3 below.

TABLE 3

LEADING EMPLOYERS

Leading Employers	1980 employees (approximate)
Whirlpool (counting rehires)	2100
Sparks Medical Center	2000
Fort Smith Medical Center	1200
Baldor Electric (electric motors)	1100
Riverside Furniture	1000
Rheem	750

The Fort Smith Chamber of Commerce supplied the following figures (Table 4) for the Fort Smith Metro Area civilian labor force.

TABLE 4

CIVILIAN LABOR FORCE

	December 1980	December 1981
Civilian labor force	82,000	85,250
Total employed*	75,400	75,350
Agricultural employment	2,200	2,200
Domestic service, self-employed & unpaid family worker	9,150	9,100
Unemployed	6,600	10,000
Unemployed rate - Ft. Smith SMSA	8.0%	11.7%
" " - Arkansas	7.9%	10.2%
" " - United States	7.4%	8.9%

*Adjusted to a place-of-residence basis
SOURCE: U.S. Department of Labor

For the City of Fort Smith 1981 employment status by sex and minority status was detailed in a report entitled "Manpower Information for Affirmative Action Programs" prepared by the Arkansas Employment Security Division (Little Rock, 1982). This report shows that while total unemployment in the City of Fort Smith in 1981 was 9.7%, the rate of unemployment for 178 members of "other races" (essentially American Indians and Asians) was 44.4%.

The Arkansas Employment Service gives the February 1983 unemployment rate for Fort Smith as 11.8%. This is up from a figure of 10.6% for the Fort Smith Metro Area for August 1982 (not seasonally adjusted).

Total manufacturing employment in the Fort Smith Metro Area decreased 6.8% from 21,250 in December, 1980, to 19,800 in December, 1981. In the same period average earnings increased from $6.06 to $6.50 per hour or from $237.55 to $250.25 per week for just under 40 hours work per week average.

During the period of fieldwork the Fort Smith division of Whirlpool Corporation announced that it would recall about 180 laid-off workers and hire an additional 780. But application forms were given only to the 2,000 current employees to distribute to friends and relatives.

One of the Hmong later indicated that by mid-summer of 1983 the major employers in Fort Smith had hired from three to five thousand additional workers. But, according to him, the jobs were taken mainly by out-of-work northerners with years of assembly-line experience. This person said that one employer was requiring that the most recent experience must have been acquired within the past twelve months, a requirement that excludes nearly all the Hmong. The Hmong were unable to secure any of these new jobs.

F. Welfare Benefits and Regulations

Only very limited public assistance for needy persons is available in the State of Arkansas. According to the report "Characteristics of General Assistance Programs," prepared by Urban Systems Research & Engineering, Inc. for the Office of Refugee Resettlement (1982), public assistance in Arkansas is state-funded but administered by the counties. There are no categorical requirements and no formal need standards. However, to receive benefits one must have resided in the county for three out of the last five years, and of these three years one must be continuous. A person who meets these requirements and is accepted for public assistance is entitled to receive $40 a month for a maximum of four payments per year.

In addition certain categories of persons in Arkansas may qualify for federal public assistance programs, such as foods stamps and SSI.

An important factor affecting the welfare of refugees resettled in Fort Smith is that there are no public clinics or other health care facilities in

Sebastian County where low-income families can receive medical, dental, or pre-natal services at a cost graduated according to income.

G. Low Income Housing

While there are no low-income housing projects that provide housing for refugees in Fort Smith, a variety of inexpensive housing, including both single-family units and apartments, is available at rentals well below those found in most parts of the country.

Older houses in Fort Smith are offered for sale at relatively low prices compared to home prices elsewhere. An American resident expressed the opinion that a couple each earning $4 an hour can buy a home in Fort Smith.

H. Refugee Services

USCC has a Regional Office in Fort Smith, serving a multi-state area. But its local office, opened in 1979, has a staff of only two - both Vietnamese, one of whom speaks fluent Lao. Their function is "to help Lao and Vietnamese who have been here less than one year receive their core services [such as] housing, job placement and ESL offered through Adult Basic Education." In practice, clients are not asked what year they arrived; the staff provides interpreting service, for example, for anyone who needs their help. The staff reported that they assist Hmong who call or come in for help - usually 2 or 3 cases a month; their services are mainly employment assistance and referrals.

The principal provider of services for refugees in Fort Smith is the Adult Basic Education (ABE) program of the Fort Smith Public Schools, which holds a $143,000 contract with the State Refugee Office for adult ESL, job training, and job placement services. The funding is targeted for refugees who have been in

the U.S. less than 18 months, but the staff try to serve other refugees who need their services as well.

This grant supported a three-month upholstery course in 1982. Principally as a result of the economic downturn, none of those who completed the course secured related employment. No job training for Southeast Asians has been offered since that time. Previous classes had been organized in cooperation with CETA. In the spring of 1983 things were dormant during the transition from CETA to its successor agency.

The ABE refugee job placement service provides counselling and assistance to refugees seeking jobs and posts jobs on a bulletin board, but has apparently done little job development with employers, at least as it would relate to the Hmong.

The Adult ESL program offers ESL classes at its center near downtown Fort Smith and "outreach classes" at various locations in the community for those who can't get to the ABE Center. Classes are scheduled at various times to fit the schedules of their clients. The ESL Program tries to provide more intensive ESL for adults who have just arrived; recently there was a special day-time class for elderly women. In March, 1983, there were eight 50-minute weekday classes (including one for reading and one for citizenship); five two-hour, two night a week evening classes; and two afternoon "outreach" classes, also meeting two days a week for two hours.

There are no interpreting services for refugees apart from USCC and the ABE Center, except that a Lao-speaking Vietnamese works as an interpreter at the Sebastian County Health Unit. Two Hmong men are employed part-time as translators and interpreters by the ABE Center. Their responsibilities include

translating items for a monthly multilingual newsletter published by the Center. They also help with placement and counselling of Hmong clients and are called upon by various other agencies to help them in their dealings with Hmong.

(Update: By the summer of 1983 the State Refugee Coordinator had provided funding for a part-time Hmong case worker, through the ABE Center, and the county Health Unit had also hired a Hmong to serve part-time on their staff.)

I. Community Receptiveness to Refugees

The Vietnamese director of USCC's Fort Smith office, who has lived in Fort Smith for seven years, finds that Fort Smith is "very quiet and slow." There have been Southeast Asian refugees in Fort Smith since 1975 when neighboring Fort Chaffee was the principal processing center for refugees arriving in the U.S. That operation gave a boost to the local economy and a number of volunteer efforts to help the refugees were organized. Now the community is accustomed to having Asian residents, but volunteerism on their behalf is down. Very few in the Fort Smith American community are aware of the Hmong as a group apart from other Asians, and until very recently even the public schools referred to them as Vietnamese.

An American who has lived all his life in Western Arkansas offered these observations:

> To a degree, people in Arkansas are rednecks. On the other hand, people in Arkansas like and respect people who work. ... But there is some resentment in hard times like these, if it's felt that one group of people is getting a special break.
>
> We have a little crime (in Fort Smith), not much, and it's mostly by outsiders and travelers, people passing through town. We have very few racially motivated crimes.

One gets the impression, in discussing employment issues, that there is a strong sense in the community of taking care of one's own. There is a general

distrust of travelers, yankees, and foreigners, and a feeling that the newcomer to the community must "pay his dues" before he can expect to be treated on the same basis as natives, one's friends and neighbors.

Hmong high school students reported generally friendly relations with other students, participation in school activities including social events, and invitations to visit in the homes of American fellow students.

When the Hmong spoke of discrimination it was particularly with reference to obtaining jobs. They were especially resentful of Whirlpool's current hiring policy, which made it impossible for them to obtain applications. They asserted that some other companies have a policy of hiring only Americans. And they resented what they perceived as discriminatory treatment by Vietnamese or ethnic Lao in a position to affect employment decisions.

There have also been acts of vandalism and theft directed against rural property and livestock owned by Hmong families. The Hmong take these incidents to be malicious and racially motivated attacks. They occurred on property the Hmong owners usually only attend to on weekends. Several times the gate to leased pasture land was opened allowing cattle owned by Hmong families to escape down the road. On one occasion, when the owners later couldn't find all the animals, the neighbors claimed they knew nothing about it. In another incident, in the summer of 1983, vandals drove onto property where Hmong families had gardens, tore up some of the crop by dragging a chain between two vehicles, and destroyed huts the owners had built on the property. Such acts deeply affect the morale of the Hmong community. When this problem was called to the attention of a local agricultural extension agent, however, he noted that such vandalism is often directed against other rural properties as well, especially where property is left unattended for long periods.

Some efforts have been made to bring the cultural contributions that refugees can make to the attention of the American community in Fort Smith. The Chinese dragon entered by Vietnamese refugees won a prize in an annual local parade. On Sunday, March 13, 1983, a full-page spread in the "Lifestyles" section of the Southwest Times Record describing an annual International Festival at Westark Community College pictured Lao girls performing the Dokchampa dance; another picture showed a Lao refugee playing native songs on a Lao flute. The first local press recognition of the Hmong came the very next day when the "Lifestyles" section announced the exhibit-sale of 85 pieces of Hmong needlecraft organized with the help of the Adult Basic Education Center and on display at the Old Fort Museum. Later that week the two local TV stations also publicized the Hmong of Fort Smith and their exhibit.

A "Cultural Awareness" program has been organized in the Fort Smith public schools for school employees. The events in this series at first focussed exclusively on the Vietnamese. Beginning in 1983, there have been evening sessions on several different nights, for different groups of employees, featuring foods and presentations from each of the ethnic groups represented in the school population.

II. LOCAL HMONG POPULATION

A. Size and Characteristics

The leaders of Lao Family Community in Fort Smith compiled these statistics descriptive of their community as of March, 1983.

Families		55
Total Hmong population		296
adults	125	
children	171	
Total elders		18
receiving SSI	6	
not receiving SSI	12	
Total employable persons		107
employed	87	
unemployed	20	
Total families on welfare		0

"Elders" are defined as older persons not seeking employment. The figures for SSI recipients show that two-thirds of the persons considered elderly or disabled by the Hmong community are not so considered by SSI regulations.

From these figures it can be determined that average family size is 5.4; that 81% of the maximum adult work force are employed (19% unemployment), and that the average number of workers per household is 1.6. There are, however, two households with no income from employment and, of course, no public assistance.

Those attending a meeting with Hmong heads of household organized for this study provided more specific information concerning household size. The data they supplied may be summarized as follows:

Household size	Number of households	Percentage of total households
2-4 persons	7	22%
5-7	14	42%
8-10	10	30%
11-13	2	6%

In this sample, average household size was 6.2 persons.

Two Hmong families in Fort Smith own their own homes. Twenty-nine of thirty-five families represented at the household heads' meeting (83%) own automobiles.

B. History of Settlement

The Hmong now living in Fort Smith came there almost exclusively through planned secondary migration from other parts of the country, and their story begins elsewhere.

The Experience in California

Among the thousands of Hmong refugees who were resettled in California between 1976 and 1978 was a group of related families belonging to the Heu (Her), Xiong, and Yang clans and to the so-called Blue Hmong dialect group, all from Xieng Khouang province in northeastern Laos. Members of these families had been converted to Christianity in Laos by missionaries of the Christian Missionary Alliance in the 1950s. After fleeing from Laos to refugee camps in Thailand, they had been resettled in Southern California.

There some found employment in a variety of skilled and unskilled jobs while others, especially those over forty who had little education and little success in learning English, were supported by public assistance programs.

Beginning in 1976, some of these Hmong were befriended by a family of Americans, Tom and Jane Ashworth and their children. The Ashworths volunteered their time to help a number of Hmong families by teaching them English and basic living skills. Mr. Ashworth started a small business called "Freedom" that employed a few Hmong doing cleaning and yard work, to help them stay off welfare. Partly through his influence, it would appear, this group of Hmong - some employed, some not - became keenly aware that living indefinitely on government assistance was not going to further their aim of starting an independent new life for themselves in this country.

It must be noted that as many as eighty percent of the employable adults who went to Fort Smith were not on public assistance prior to their move but left steady, full-time jobs in order to go. Why would people with jobs quit and move away, especially when, at the beginning, the move involved leaving rather than rejoining relatives?

The answer given by one Hmong informant has to do with welfare policies and the cost of living in states like California where they moved from. In California a family might have one person working and also receive supplemental welfare payments under the "thirty and one-third" policy. If the other spouse took a minimum wage job the family would lose benefits, and with the high cost of living their income would drop below what they needed to make ends meet. In Fort Smith (they thought), with a lower cost of living, a family would be able to live on the income from two minimum wage jobs. Another factor was their interest in farming, which did not seem feasible in California. And later on, of course, some left jobs to move to Fort Smith because the move would reunite them with members of their kin groups and fellow Hmong Christians who had already made the move.

Moreover, the unemployed Hmong were distressed at the idea of living on charity. They were losing self-respect, and they did not want their children to grow up seeing their parents unemployed and unable to support their own families. They were also sick of filing applications and all of the other governmental red tape that welfare dependence entails. They wanted to do whatever was necessary to become economically independent - not only to obtain better jobs, but to get into farming or some other business they owned themselves. A family business could achieve several goals at once - employment for many family members, less need for all family members to speak English, and, most important, independence from welfare and an unpredictable American employer. At the beginning they considered the idea of farming in California. But they soon became convinced that, with rents and land prices what they were in California, they would not be able to make it if they stayed there.

These families kept in touch with relatives who had moved to Salt Lake City and other relatives scattered around the U.S. They knew that many of these were less well off than those in California, and were also seeking a better kind of life.

Seeking a New Start

The Ashworth family, then residing in Santa Ana, was originally from the Fort Smith area. When this family moved back to Fort Smith in 1978, their Hmong friends felt that they had suffered a great loss. Some lost their jobs, because they had been working for Tom Ashworth. They also had lost the friendly advice of these close American friends. But this event also suggested a new direction for their developing plans for self-sufficiency.

They telephoned Tom Ashworth and asked his advice about moving out of California and relocating in some place where they might find a lower cost-of-

living, more jobs, and greater opportunities for farming or an agriculture-related business. According to Mr. Ashworth, he did not suggest that they move to Fort Smith. He mentioned several possible locations that they might consider. But he told them, if they wished, to come out and look things over.

One member of the California group then went to Fort Smith. He was impressed. The warm climate, the lush vegetation, and the small farms with chickens and pigs reminded him of Laos. There was no welfare program to assist them and few refugee services, but that was seen as a plus: there might be less government interference in their lives. The Vietnamese and Lao refugees in Fort Smith had found jobs in manufacturing, and there were jobs in the poultry industry that one could get into and out of easily. Most importantly, he found that rents and the price of houses and farm land were much lower than in California.

When he returned to California, he reported his impressions. The others liked what he told them about the land and the people and the economic climate. In Fort Smith, they realized, they would also again have an American "adviser" to help them get started. If their plans worked out, they could invite other relatives to leave their dependence on the government and join them.

After much consultation, a decision was reached to begin planning a move that, if successful in the first stages, would eventually establish a new Hmong colony in Fort Smith - not a heterogenious collection of Hmong, but a unified community of families related by blood and the social bonds resulting from marriages between clans, united in their religious faith as well as in their desire for economic independence and self-sufficiency. They conceived their plan as initiating a true beginning for a new life in America, after the false

start of two or more years of dependency under the federal government's Refugee Resettlement Program.

The Move to Fort Smith

In November, 1979, the first two Hmong families moved to Fort Smith. Tom Ashworth had gotten into the construction and demolition business and he offered the men jobs, as laborer and truck driver. Their wives found employment in a local poultry processing plant. Both families bought houses in Fort Smith soon after arrival. During their first year in Fort Smith the two families sponsored two families of relatives to join them directly from Thailand.

The relatives still in California were impressed by their early success in Fort Smith. Some came to visit and liked what they saw as much as the earlier "scout" had. After further discussions, other families started to move to Fort Smith from California. In May, 1981, five families came together from Santa Ana, and in September of that year two more. Three others came from Illinois and Kansas City before the end of the year. In 1981-82, nine families moved to Fort Smith from Oklahoma. Four more came from Illinois in 1982, and between May and August, 1982, seventeen families arrived from Salt Lake City and various places in California. Late in 1982, two more families came from Santa Ana, and three single men from Missoula, Montana. Two families also came from Saint Paul, but they never became integrated into the very tight Hmong community that had developed in Fort Smith. Finally there were over fifty Hmong households in Fort Smith.

Economic Difficulties

Meanwhile, however, the settlement was affected by the general economic slump that took place during this period. With the faltering economy, Tom

Ashworth's construction business folded in 1981. Again with his help, his two Hmong employees were able to find other fairly good jobs, but others were not so fortunate. While almost every family found some employment, nearly all of it was in low-paying jobs in the local poultry plants. Persons with both job skills and a reasonable command of English, who had earned a decent living before coming to Fort Smith, found themselves either among the unemployed or in the same situation as those with few skills and little English, working at the unskilled jobs of cutting and deboning chickens. As of March, 1983, two families had no employment and were being supported by food stamps and the contributions of other members of the Hmong community.

The dream that brought these people to Fort Smith was not, in any case, just to attain full employment, but to become self-employed by acquiring land and farming it, raising livestock, and creating their own business enterprises. A few families bought land and cattle and leased pasturage (see III C below), but with the low wages they were now receiving and the bills they incurred in connection with childbirth and hospitalization for illness they did not have the means to develop their plans. Not only could they not save the money needed as capital for agricultural enterprises that could provide a living but what savings they had when they arrived were rapidly depleted. By the spring of 1983, some families had debts of thousands of dollars for hospital bills, and others were just getting by, with barely enough to eat.

The Factor of Unity

Part of the plan of "colonization" was that a community should be formed that shared common beliefs and goals. The community is formally organized (apart from kinship) in two ways. They have their own religious congregation

with a Hmong pastor as leader and various church officers. And since December, 1982, they have also been organized as a branch of Lao Family Community, Inc., a mutual assistance organization. There is no recognition of clan differences in either of these organizations; all are equal members without distinction.

It has seemed important to them that others who might come to join the community share their beliefs and dreams - that they be willing to participate in their church and in their economic development efforts. While one or two families have come who do not satisfy these expectations, the Hmong leaders in Fort Smith try to make this idea of unity of purpose clear to any family that proposes to come there from elsewhere.

III. RESETTLEMENT ISSUES

A. Employment

Employment Rate

The Hmong leadership reported that in March, 1983, 87 of the Hmong in Fort Smith were employed, out of a potential work force of 107 persons. The average number of workers per household was 1.6. Only two households had no employment; these families were supported by contributions from other members of the community. In one of these there were 13 persons including a pregnant woman.

In a meeting with 35 Fort Smith Hmong household heads (all male) the following information was obtained concerning employment:

Households with no members employed	2
Households with one member employed	15
Households with two members employed	12
Households with three members employed	0
	29 reporting

Thus according to the data collected for this study, in the 29 households reporting, there were 39 persons working, for an average of 1.33 persons per household. Reported employment of heads of household was as follows:

Heads of household working		19
full-time	15	
part-time	3	
unreported	1	
Heads of household not working or not reported (of 35)		16
Heads of household ever laid off		7
Heads of household never employed (in the U.S.)		1

In a meeting with 18 women of the Fort Smith Hmong community, ranging in age from the twenties to two individuals over 65, the following was reported concerning their employment:

Women working	11
Women not working	7

Types of Employment and Pay Rates

The relatively high level of employment, however, gives a false impression of the economic well-being of the Hmong in Fort Smith. This is because all of the women and nearly all of the men were employed (in early March, 1983) in a single occupation: cutting, trimming or deboning chicken, at one or the other of two local poultry processing plants. The typical pay is the minimum wage. Experienced workers can make up to $4.25 as base pay. From the meeting of household heads, again, the types of employment and rates of pay reported were as follows:

Type of employment of heads of household:	
poultry processing	15
assembly line	2
cook	1
unreported	1
Pay rate of heads of household:	
$4 or less	17
$4.01 - 5.00	1
$5.01 - 6.00	1
above $6.00	0

From the women's meeting:

Type of employment of women:	
poultry processing	11
other	0
Pay rate of women:	
$4.00 or less	5
above $4.00	6

Those doing piece work can theoretically make up to $7 an hour with incentive pay. But there are penalties for leaving bone in the meat which make fast work risky. Most workers in these plants, and by extension most Hmong in Fort Smith, were making no more than $4.00 an hour.

Furthermore, although shifts are nominally eight hours, the night shift

where many of the Hmong work may run longer or shorter, depending on the supply of chicken. Usually it is shorter, so that these workers may only average six to seven hours per day.

Finally, at the plant where most of the Hmong work, there is no employer-paid health care plan. The extent of health care coverage reported in the meeting of household heads was as follows:

Household heads receiving health insurance	4
with dependent coverage	4
Not insured or not reporting (of those employed)	15

From the women's meeting:

Women receiving health insurance from employer	0

In the typical case, then, Hmong workers were earning near minimum wage at less than full-time, with a large family to feed and no health care coverage to protect against high medical bills.

The Hmong, refugee workers, and employment specialists all agree that the poultry processing industry is the only employer in Fort Smith willing to accept persons with very low English language proficiency. Only a handful of Hmong in Fort Smith have obtained other jobs: two were working for a glass company, two were working part-time for the Adult Basic Education program, and one had a good job on the assembly line at Gerber. In March, 1983, the first woman got a job outside "the chicken place": she was employed in a dog-grooming shop, doing a job for which she had sought out training in California. Since then, one man has been hired as a mechanic in a service station, one part-time in the personnel office of a company employing Hmong workers, and two in part-time refugee service positions.

Underemployment

An important point to note in evaluating the Hmong employment situation in Fort Smith is that many of the unemployed and many of those working in the poultry plants have a variety of skills. Among them are persons who were government officials, military officers, communications specialists, carpenters, blacksmiths, truck drivers, and nurses in Laos. They have also held jobs in the U.S. in electronic assembly, quality control, diesel mechanics, custodial work, nursing (nurse's aide), and machine sewing. Some of these people speak English quite adequately for a variety of occupations, and the individuals who have not found work in Fort Smith include some with the best command of English and the best previous work experience. The best-educated Hmong man in Fort Smith was unemployed in March 1983, and so was a man who practiced Western medicine in Laos.

The reasons for the present employment status of the Hmong in Fort Smith are no doubt many, including the following: 1) the current economic slump and high general unemployment; 2) a lack of aggressive employment efforts, especially job development for refugees; 3) the inappropriate use of English proficiency as a criterion for employment; 4) overt discrimination.

The Poultry Processing Jobs

As noted above, nearly all Hmong employed in Fort Smith, over 80 persons, were working in two local poultry processing plants: 15 at O.K. Foods and the others at Poultry Specialties.

The Hmong who work at these plants find the working conditions very unpleasant. The jobs involve cutting, trimming, deboning, and weighing chicken meat. Many were working night shifts, often with husband and wife working dif-

ferent shifts or at different plants. The plants are located on the outskirts of Van Buren, several miles from Fort Smith proper where all of the Hmong live. This means that it is necessary either to own a car or to carpool with someone who does. Most workers do their work standing up and leaning over the conveyer. Their fingers often become sore, swollen and raw, especially in deboning, partly because the meat is often at a temperature near freezing.

The most unpleasant part of the job, the Hmong reported, is that they are badly treated by their supervisors. They feel they are given scant praise for a job well done and are dealt with through abrupt orders and yelled at when they do not understand or make a mistake. They stated that they are subjected to name-calling and other verbal abuse by persons who perhaps believe they don't understand. They also said that they suspect discrimination in the employment and advancement of Hmong workers. The women in particular reported that they had helped train American women who were subsequently given supervisory responsibilities in preference to them. (No doubt language ability might be offered by the management as a reason for such a decision, although several of the women speak English well.) In addition, as steady, long-term workers, the Hmong who work for the company that does not provide health insurance feel that it should be offered. But the employees of this company are not organized to demand it.

Staff of the Arkansas Employment Security office indicated that the poultry plants (along with local lumber mills) have a reputation for having the highest local employee turn-over rate. For most local workers they provide a place to earn some money, if necessary, during lay-offs or between jobs. As soon as something else develops, they leave. Some of the Hmong have worked at the same job in the plants for as long as three or four years; the Southeast Asians in

general have been their most faithful employees. To keep a steady work force, the employment officials said, these plants need the Hmong workers as much as the workers need the jobs. But their personnel policies do not seem to reflect this dependence except in their willingness to hire Hmong as workers.

One of the companies employing Hmong workers is reported to be a $60 million a year business. But the owners reportedly argue that they can't compete unless they pay minimum wages, because their competitors use Mexican labor.

An Indochinese working in the personnel department at one of the poultry companies indicated that 50% of their work force is made up of Indochinese. The company is very satisfied with their Hmong employees. He reported that he felt the Hmong were very good workers but that they seemed to be "in a different world" - not quite aware of what was going on around them. Yet, he said, all of the Indochinese were better employees than the Americans, with their high turnover rate.

This man stated that he was called upon to make recommendations on the hiring and retention of Indochinese workers. He said that in hiring he considers need, transportation, and stature; he judges applicants' English ability on the basis of how long they have been in this country.

The following information was also supplied by this Indochinese employee. Most jobs that the Indochinese hold offer incentive pay. Mean pay with incentive bonus for trimmers is $4.50. Deboners can earn up to $8.00. When employees are let go the usual reason is that their work is substandard. There is continual quality control. If a person has three rejects in a shift a warning is given. If the problem is repeated, written warning is given. The next step is a 3-day suspension. If the problem persists, the person is fired.

When employees have problems, he said, the management tries to accommodate. In one case, a man's shift was changed to match his spouse's schedule. In other cases, management has tried to arrange car-pooling.

According to this source, the company tries to see that its supervisors are acquainted with the various ethnic groups, know the employees' names, and can give a personal touch to their work. As an Indochinese himself, he periodically conducts orientations for the supervisors. His impression was that "the supervisors probably know the Meo [Hmong] from the others."

Hmong employees have sometimes "blown up," he reported. Some men became very angry on occasion. This, he suggested, was because they don't communicate and express their feelings on a day-to-day basis. He indicated that he was also aware that some women may be under great pressure at home, with heavy family responsibilities on top of an exacting job.

Most firings, he said, have been because of quality of work. Some people, he said, are just not suited to this type of work. There have also been a couple of layoffs (of Indochinese) for insubordination.

He noted that under a new personnel policy, no supervisor can fire someone on his own authority. They can send someone home if there is an incident and then report the incident to him in the personnel office, where any decision to fire must originate. The company also now requires a debriefing at termination (presumably so there can be no misunderstanding of the reasons for termination). Because of these policies, he said, there should be no communication problems. To aid communication the company has published an employee handbook in Vietnamese and Lao. If problems do arise with Hmong employees, the Indochinese said he calls upon one of the Hmong translators at the Adult basic education Center,

who has been very helpful.

Since the fieldwork for this report was completed, it is reported that the Indochinese interviewed has resigned from his position, and the company where he worked has hired a Hmong man part-time to perform some of the duties that previously were his.

As noted above, one of the poultry companies, OK Foods, contributes to a health insurance plan for its employees, but the other, Poultry Specialties, does not. It was reported by a person in the management of this company that their reasoning is that in their competitive positon it is too expensive, and it would be complicated because of the high employee turnover. Insurance is available through the company, but the employee must pay a high premium. For $100 deductible covering everything but maternity, and including life insurance, the cost for a single person aged 24 is $20.20 per month. Because of the high cost there are few takers, and none of the Hmong have purchased this insurance.

Other Employment

In March, 1983, only one Hmong in Fort Smith, one of the first two settlers, had a job with any of the major manufacturers; he was running a machine on the label line at Gerber Foods, making $6.09 per hour plus health benefits. But he and his wife were both working nights and taking care of the children during the day. He felt that the lack of sleep was affecting his health. Gerber has about 16 male Vietnamese workers, but has hired no other Hmong, and no Southeast Asian women in the "women's jobs."

Three of the Hmong in Fort Smith have been employed by a company that makes beveled glass and glass shelving. The first one was hired in 1981, but he hurt his back after five weeks on the job. He has not worked since. The two still

working were both running a "Weber" machine, cutting and edging sheets of glass. They were working different shifts. Wages were $6.15 per hour and they were receiving health insurance.

The company, which employs about 67 workers, has employed a number of Southeast Asians and has been very satisfied with them as workers. The manager said that if he could he wouldn't mind having only Southeast Asian employees. But only one Southeast Asian, a Vietnamese, has been promoted to a supervisory position in his plant. He told us that his wife, who had taught ESL to refugees, first persuaded him to hire Southeast Asian refugee workers.

The manager feels that ability to communicate in English is very important in this company. The supervisor must be able to explain things and be understood. There have been communication problems with some Southeast Asian employees, although not with the Hmong. For this reason they interview applicants carefully before hiring. He said the Hmong should be told how important language ability is in getting a job; they must find some way to continue studying English. One of the Hmong employees, however, said the only time he could recall extensive use of English was during the job interview itself. He does little besides running his one machine, and the dimensions for cutting are written on the glass sheets; only rarely does the supervisor have something to tell him.

Another Hmong in the community stated that this glass company had advertised openings and hired seven or eight people early in February, 1983. Several Hmong applied; none were hired.

Employment Opportunities and Job Placement

The manager referred to above said he had recommended to several of his

peers in other companies that they hire Southeast Asians. But their prospects for getting jobs depend on what happens in the local economy. He said that the action that would help the Hmong most to get into the major companies and to fight discrimination or the apprehension of employers would be for the staff of the local refugee job placement program to get out and talk to employers. There is an association of manufacturers, but that, he said, is not the way to go. Instead they should talk to individual companies and ask them to take on a refugee worker. (At the time the local State-funded service provider apparently was not doing this.)

Most of the currently employed Hmong have secured their jobs through the Arkansas Employment Security office in Van Buren. The staff there have made a special effort to help refugees. The Hmong reported that they do not receive much help from the Fort Smith Employment Security office; the manager of that office, when interviewed, admitted that he did not know who the Hmong are. Some of the Hmong have gotten jobs through the State-funded refugee services program. Many of them have applied for advertised jobs in the larger manufacturing firms, with no success. They feel that the doors are closed to them, and that they are subject to discrimination directed against Asians generally. In one company, it was reported, a Southeast Asian refugee employee in the personnel office was guaranteeing jobs if applicants paid him $200. Another company reportedly told applicants that they were hiring only Americans. Hmong applicants have been told that their English is not good enough, even though they have previously held similar jobs.

Many of the manufacturing companies will not accept experience in the poultry processing plants as relevant work experience. But the head of the

state Employment Security office in Fort Smith said that experience in the poultry processing plants would give the Hmong local credibility: if they hold on to that kind of job, they must be steady, serious workers. He stressed the idea that a stable local work history is the ticket to employment in the better jobs. However, there is apparently also a stigma attached to working in the poultry plants. Even the Southeast Asian manager interviewed said he didn't like to tell people he works at the "chicken place."

One major employer reportedly has set the following criteria for employment: one year's manufacturing experience, ability to do repetitive work, a good local work history, plus a physical examination. Thus Hmong who had manufacturing experience in other states but have been unemployed or have only worked in the poultry industry since coming to Fort Smith are excluded from consideration.

B. Welfare Dependence

> All the Hmong know that welfare is like the fruit tree. It bears fruit and then the tree is empty. The fruit is there for just one season, then it is gone. The fruit is not forever. Welfare is like that. It only stays for the people who can't help themselves.

This parable, from a man who spoke at the meeting of Hmong household heads in Fort Smith, summarizes much of these people's perception of the American welfare system. An even pithier expression of this view is the metaphorical Hmong translation of the expression on welfare: "no arms, no legs."

As already noted, no Hmong families in Fort Smith receive public assistance, other than SSI and food stamps. Those among them who have no income from employment are supported by private charity within their Hmong church congregation. Many left generous welfare support as well as good jobs in other

states in order to try to make a new start in Fort Smith, knowing that there would be no welfare to fall back on there if they failed.

The present Hmong "colony" in Fort Smith was established expressly to escape welfare dependence and establish an independent and self-sufficient life. To quote Tom Ashworth, "They came here out of desperation, knowing that Arkansas is the worst state in the U.S. for welfare." Their hope was to be dependent neither on the government, nor on private charity, nor if possible on wage labor, but to establish their own livelihoods in farming and self-owned businesses. Their present concerns have as much to do with how to advance this latter goal as with escaping welfare dependence and finding fuller and more adequate employment.

C. Economic Development

In the short time they have been in Fort Smith the Hmong have managed to make a few investments aimed at improving the economic well-being of the community. This has been done in keeping with their long-range aim of gaining economic independence through ownership of farms and businesses.

Purchase of Land

Soon after moving from California to Fort Smith, in 1982, thirteen Hmong families decided to jointly purchase a parcel of rural land. At that time there were only seventeen Hmong families in Fort Smith. What they had in mind was building a Hmong village, complete with a church. After selecting a site comprising 13 acres, twelve miles from Fort Smith, they agreed to purchase it. Each of the thirteen families had to pay a portion of the down payment - less than $300 per family. This was possible because most had received a sum of money when they left their previous job to move to Fort Smith, from insurance

contributions, etc. Each family has subsequently paid its share of the mortgage payments, amounting to $33 a month per family.

After the land was purchased, the owners began to clear it. It was haav zoov, jungle, as the Hmong described it, in the beginning. There were trees up to four feet thick, hung with vines. On weekends, people cut trees and burned brush. The thirteen families who own lots paid to have a road put in from the main highway. The cost was again divided among the thirteen participating families - $200 each.

Leasing of Land

In addition to this land purchase, groups of families have twice leased land and bought cattle, and more recently other animals, to graze on it, which they sell or slaughter for their own tables. The money to purchase the first cattle was contributed by a woman who had accumulated some savings. She agreed to invest her savings in the enterprise, at no interest, to be repaid eventually by the other members of the group. The Hmong began visiting the livestock dealers and watching the auctions. With their capital funds they were able to purchase twenty cattle. They sold all of the first cattle they bought, and then bought more. They reported that they don't make a big profit but they like to know that they have cattle whenever they need them. Even though they are poor by American standards, one said, it makes them feel secure to have a farm. When someone needs meat, several families join together and buy one of the animals to slaughter and share among them.

These investments have thus already paid dividends in the form of vegetables and meat for their tables. But they do not provide the full-time family farming that the Fort Smith Hmong desire.

Starting a Cooperative Food Store

Another investment was the formation of the Asia Food Store. Fourteen families opened the store as a cooperative in December, 1982. Each family drew upon funds from the withdrawal of retirement contributions, etc., when they left jobs in California to produce its share of the $15,000 required for initial rent payments, start-up costs and the purchase of merchandise. The store specialized in foods that the Hmong have difficulty finding elsewhere. The rent was high because the building is large and most of the space was unused except for community meetings. For this reason, sales just covered costs, leaving no profit for expansion of the range and quantity of merchandise. The management of the cooperative therefore, at the time of this study, had approached the Small Business Administration with a request for a loan of $50-110,000 to permit them to expand the store within the available space. But the loan was not obtained, and the store has since been sold to another refugee group.

The Role of a Mutual Assistance Association

Most of the Hmong in Fort Smith have come to agree that future economic development efforts should be initiated by a formal organization representing the community as a whole. To this end, the community formed a mutual assistance association as a branch of the national Lao Family Community (LFC) late in 1982.

This came about as follows. In September, 1982, a local Hmong had visited the Executive Director of the national organization in Santa Ana about forming a branch in Fort Smith. He returned with information about the organization and copies of by-laws and articles of incorporation. A meeting to form the local organization was held in November. It was decided that they would not organize by clans (as had been done elsewhere). The officers and board members would be

elected by vote of the total membership, and all board members would be members at large.

The organization was formed and an eleven-member Board of Directors was elected. There is a Chairman, a Vice Chairman, a Secretary, and a Treasurer. Each of the other seven members has some other special job. Also chosen by vote of the total membership is an Executive Director. Annual elections are to be held for all positions except the Executive Director. Incorporation as a non-profit organization with the State of Arkansas took place in the summer of 1983.

The purpose of the organization is primarily to help newcomers to the community, to help members find jobs, and to organize economic development efforts. Any newcomers who do not agree to the aims and policies of the organization in advance will not be offered membership.

The officers of Lao Family Community in Fort Smith have developed some plans for the further economic development of the Hmong community which if realized would move a majority of the Hmong in Fort Smith out of minimum wage jobs in American businesses and into self-employment in farming or participation in a Hmong-owned business. The following sections will give a brief description of these plans and ideas and also report some suggestions of others concerning potentially feasible self-employment possibilities.

The aim of LFC is to realize the vision these people came to Fort Smith with, their hope of growing rice and raising cattle, chickens, and hogs as well as having small factories, a medical clinic, etc. But they recognize that they may need loans from the government or the private sector to get started, and they also have been thinking about alternative crops and livestock possibilities that might bring the greatest economic benefit. With large families including

older people who cannot otherwise secure employment, they have been considering farming operations that would be labor-intensive rather than requiring expensive machinery or complex technologies.

Farming Possibilities

At a meeting with the LFC Board members the group's American friend, Tom Ashworth, shared this information about farming possibilities:

> Arkansas is the country's foremost rice producer. Other large crops grown in the state are soybeans, corn and cotton. These crops are large-scale farming operations, capital intensive rather than labor-intensive. Even Americans, who own some of the best rice-producing land around, flat land with wells, have switched to corn in recent years because they couldn't make it growing rice. I know three men who work 1,000 acres with the help of a million dollars in capital investments. They are just making a living. It doesn't seem reasonable for the Hmong to compete with these American farmers.
>
> Rice is in any case grown mainly in the flat eastern part of the state, toward the Mississippi. Although rice is moving up the Arkansas River valley toward Fort Smith, it is premature to think of the Hmong entering that field commercially at the present time. But they could easily grow enough rice to feed their own community. Forty acres and a tractor would be enough to do it.

The Hmong are considering some other crops, such as their American friend has suggested, peaches for example. He told them an acre of peach trees can produce $4,000-6,000, compared to $600 from an acre of rice. Strawberries and blueberries are other possibilities. An agriculture extension agent stated in an interview that the Fort Smith region used to produce large amounts of strawberries, but labor got to be a problem. Now all that is left are some pick-it-yourself farms. By supplying their own family labor, he said, the Hmong might be quite successful. Other possibilities are cucumbers for pickles and even wine grapes; Arkansas is producing increasing amounts of table wine.

Land prices are low but rising. Tom Ashworth stated that prime bottom land near town goes for $1,000 an acre. (The Hmong paid almost $3,000 an acre for the uncleared rural land they bought to build on, probably too much.) Further away from Fort Smith the land is cheaper; fifty miles out of town good land might sell for $400 an acre, according to Mr. Ashworth.

In March, 1983, the Lao Family board members were interested in finding a way to get some farming or at least large-scale gardening, for supplemental income, started. There was the possibility that unused land near town could be used without charge, that help could be obtained from the agricultural extension service, and that, given the use of an old tractor, a vegetable crop might be produced during the summer 1983 season. But these plans did not materialize.

The national Lao Family Community organization has done work to explore and develop markets nationwide for certain specialty crops, particularly oriental vegetables. There is a possibility that, if the Fort Smith community could begin to produce those crops, they could not only sell them in their own Asia Food Market but also ship to markets in the midwest and east.

The Lao Family Community board also expressed interest in exploring the possibility of raising livestock, in addition to the cattle already owned by members of the community. They would like to raise chickens and hogs at least for their own consumption and to sell to individuals locally or through their store. It has been suggested that rather than trying to compete in "assembly-line" methods of producing chickens now practiced by Americans, the Hmong might be able to raise chemical-free, naturally grown poultry for sale to gourmet and organic food outlets.

Other Economic Development Plans

The LFC Board has also drawn up detailed plans for a Hmong-owned poultry

processing plant, drawing on their experience as workers in the local plants to produce floor plans and an organizational scheme. The production of boneless chicken is a fast-growing industry and does not require a great deal of equipment or machinery. What they envision is a deboning plant with 210 employees on two shifts.

The Hmong leaders in Fort Smith have developed these plans without consulting with Americans (with the exception of their one American friend, at a late stage in their development) and without consideration of sources of assistance that may be available to them in the community. The American in charge of job development for the local State-funded service provider stated that he had never been informed of the Hmong's interest in farming even though two of the Hmong work part-time in the same office. Until recently the Hmong in Fort Smith seem to have been unaware of such sources of technical assistance as the agricultural extension service and the University of Arkansas.

In March, 1983, through the mediation of a member of the field staff conducting this study, a first meeting was arranged with extension agents in two different offices, one of whom expressed considerable interest and offered some immediate assistance.

During the same period local Hmong and a visiting officer of the National Lao Family Community met with an assistant city administrator in Fort Smith concerning the possiblity of assistance from the city in locating unworked farm land that might be used on a short-term basis to begin Hmong truck farming. They were told that unused land belonging to the city might be made available for that purpose. But subsequent repeated telephone calls to city hall reportedly brought no results.

The principal obstacle to realizing the Hmong's economic development plans is their lack of capital. The Board members have been considering the possibility of establishing a Hmong credit union. Their idea is that those Hmong who are working would contribute a certain percentage of their monthly incomes to the credit union, with the money to be used to purchase farms. If the poultry plant idea were in operation, for example, and 15% of the wages of 210 employees went into the credit union, $21,000 would be produced each month for investment.

But for the present their earnings are not enough for them to accumulate any savings. So the Board members have been looking for borrowed capital. They have gone to the Small Business Administration, but they were told that they couldn't be helped unless they had some capital of their own to invest. So they have turned to the state and federal refugee programs for help. They argue that it makes more sense for the federal government to invest some money in the kind of business ventures they propose than to put all of the refugee funding into welfare maintenance programs that lead nowhere. By moving to Fort Smith they have reduced the impact of refugees on the welfare programs of the states they left. If they can develop an economically viable life in Arkansas, other Hmong will be able to leave welfare in other states to join them, further reducing those states' welfare burden.

An older man had this to say at the meeting of household heads:

> I came to America in September, 1976. First I lived in Santa Ana and got welfare. Then I moved to Kansas City. I still got welfare. My life didn't change. From 1976 until I moved to Arkansas I received assistance every day. I kept an account of what I received; in seven years I received $49,800 from the government. It made me lazy and it made me very sad. My family received almost $50,000, but it did not help me to rebuild my life.
>
> In Fort Smith we plan a new way. Not like the old welfare way. For the welfare I thank the government. But I thank you only a little bit, not a lot. We need help in another way than welfare. We came to the United States to learn new things. What do I learn? I learn how to be lazy and stay at home and wait for other people to feed me.

> If we have land we can be self-sufficient. We wouldn't need anyone to help us. In Laos there was no land ownership. You can move each year. But in America all the land has owners. You can buy land, but for that we, the Hmong, need help. That is the kind of help we want, not welfare. Will the government help us to stabilize our life in America? Or will we be the poor people forever?

D. Job Training

Background: Job Skills

Thirteen of the household heads who attended the group meeting have received job training of some kind in the U.S. Two said they had received training in Fort Smith (see below); the others said they had received training elsewhere in the U.S. Twenty-two of the men at that meeting said that they had not received any training, although some had learned job skills through previous employment. The following table indicates the number of persons who said they had received any training, by type of training and location.

No. of persons	Type of training received	Location
1	electronics	Santa Ana
1	machine shop	Santa Ana
1	general auto mechanic	Anaheim
1	auto body (adult education)	Illinois
1	maintenance work	Kansas City
1	buildings & grounds (Tech. College)	Utah
1	welding	Utah
3	furniture making	Utah (1), Ft. Smith (2)

All of the heads of household indicated a desire for future job training.

None of the women who attended the group meeting reported any job training in U.S., but several said they have skills acquired in previous employment in other states, where they did assembly work, quality control, and machine sewing. One reported in an interview that she had taken training in small animal grooming in California.

A number of Hmong in Fort Smith received extensive training for positions they held in Laos. Besides those who were military officers, for example, six members of the community were given training and employment in the medical field by the U.S. government. They include four women trained by U.S. AID in Laos as nurses. They attended a school and were given diplomas signed by the U.S. Ambassador; their training was reportedly equivalent to an American R.N. A man received similar training in Thailand. Another man, after completing two years of training for the nursing degree, took two additional courses to qualify as a Practical Doctor. The nurses then worked for AID in Laos. The doctor worked alongside senior doctors in AID-operated clinics. All of them also worked later in the refugee camps in Thailand.

In California, one of the nurses was employed as a nurse's aide, and another worked as a health aide, providing public health information in a refugee program. The doctor did not find employment in the health field in the U.S., and in fact was unemployed at the time this study was done. He has since been hired part-time as an interpreter by the Sebastian County Health Unit. He has also served the Hmong community in Fort Smith as an unlicensed midwife.

Local Job Training

Job training for refugees is one of the services provided under the Fort Smith Adult Basic Education (ABE) Center's state grant for refugee services. There were three Hmong including a woman in the group that received training in upholstering at the Center in 1982. The course ran for three months, and included a component of ESL as well as "socialization classes," dealing with interviewing and behavior on the job.

Although the training was intended to lead to jobs at local furniture com-

panies, and there had been some agreement to that effect at the time the training was started, none of the trainees was able to get an appropriate job. According to the job training coordinator at ABE, the companies said that the economy had affected them like everyone else; some were hiring, but only persons with a minimum of two year's experience. Formal training didn't count.

The job training coordinator said that he doesn't know of any area of training they could offer that would present a better chance of success in getting placements. He criticized employers for not accepting the training in lieu of factory experience, because he is certain that his students can do everything the jobs require. He also expressed concern that future funding for his program may be affected if the training is not effective in terms of placements, even though the companies' refusal to accept the graduates was out of his hands.

The coordinator and the upholstery teacher have thought of borrowing a work-space and setting up their own business to employ the trainees in re-upholstering furniture. Or they would be glad to be consultants to a refugee-owned business. But another American informant pointed out that the area produces so much furniture that the local market is saturated.

Asked about other local job training the ABE job-training coordinator said that Westark Community College in effect refuses to get involved in vocational training for refugees. He noted that they had a bad experience when they tried to provide refugee training a few years ago. They applied for and received funding for a program, but for some reason the program lost money. Also, people they had trained subsequently left town, so they couldn't get credit for placements. Now, he said, they are reluctant to accept anyone who they think is

likely to leave town. Also, the college has adopted an "all-or-nothing attitude" on language; they claim to be unable to handle people in job-training programs who are not native speakers of English. If they don't speak English fluently, they belong in ESL. As a result, job training for refugees is left entirely up to the ABE program. Also, this person expressed a feeling that the past problems Westark has had with refugees may affect the way refugees are treated when they try to enroll for regular classes at the college.

Meanwhile, in the spring of 1983 no job training for Southeast Asians was being done in the public schools' ABE program, and none was to be started until a new federal agency had been put in operation to replace the recently disbanded CETA program which had previously supported the trainees.

Hmong Views

The Hmong interviewed, both men and women, said that they have skills in a great many areas among their group, sufficient to meet the demands of a self-owned business or farming operation. The variety of jobs they have held in Laos and the U.S. has already been mentioned. They also feel that they are adept at learning by demonstration: "We can do anything a person can show us how to do." Some seem to feel that they can learn better by being shown how to do something on the job than by formal instruction which may tax their language skills. On the other hand, a practical course such as the upholstery course, including related language instruction, would seem to be appropriate for many, if it would actually lead to jobs.

E. Education

Background: The Fort Smith Public Schools

All of the Hmong children in Fort Smith attend the schools of the Fort Smith Special School District, which include 21 elementary, four junior high, and two senior high schools. Eighty-eight children are identified by the schools as Hmong, all of whom are considered to have limited English proficiency (LEP) - at least potentially, on the basis of their mother tongue. Because the Hmong, like other minority populations in Fort Smith, are dispersed throughout many areas of the city, and there is no bussing, they attend a number of different schools. Their special language needs are addressed by a staff of itinerant ESL teachers who spend a period or two each day in a given school, meeting with generally small groups of students, to work on English and sometimes other subjects with which they may be having difficulty.

The 1982-83 staff of six includes one person with a graduate degree in linguistics/ESL, two other Americans, and three Vietnamese, serving LEP students in twelve of the district's schools.

Until recently the LEP program was thought of as essentially a Vietnamese program, and Hmong children, when they first arrived, were not distinguished from other Southeast Asians. During the 1982-1983 school year there has been an attempt to correct this, and teachers are expected to recognize Vietnamese, Lao, and Hmong students, and to know something about each group. But when high school students were asked whether their teachers know who they are, one boy replied that if teachers ask if they are Vietnamese, and they say "No, we're Hmong, from Laos," the teachers "don't know Hmong."

At the time of our fieldwork the District's federal programs office had

just submitted an application for a basic grant under the Bilingual Education Act. This grant has since been approved, making possible a new bilingual education program beginning in the fall of 1983. The staff was to include two Hmong bilingual "Assistant Instructors" (along with two Vietnamese and two Lao) and a Hmong case worker. The program was planned to provide native-language assistance as well as ESL for Hmong and other LEP students, whose numbers were projected to increase by 25% each year for the next few years.

Hmong Student Performance

The Hmong students seem to study hard in school, and in general they report that they are making good progress. But an ESL teacher in the public schools said that the Hmong on the whole are doing less well than other students. He said that the Hmong students definitely have more trouble with English than do the other Southeast Asians. The reason seems to be their lack of previous education. Many Hmong students also have serious deficiencies in math. The Hmong boys, he said, seem to want to stay ahead of the girls and may take on more than they can handle. One boy signed up for an algebra class. He seemed to be learning the algebra concepts all right, but the teacher discovered he couldn't do the problems because he didn't know fractions. The ESL teachers try to give individual attention where needed. For example, the teacher interviewed is working with a group of three girls in one class on multiplication, division, and fractions, two hours per day. He said he thinks that the Hmong students will benefit greatly from the district's planned bilingual education program.

In a meeting with Hmong high school students, it was reported that most Hmong students like math courses best and dislike social studies because there is so much reading. One girl said she likes English, and that her teacher told

her she was good in English, but other students said they were embarrassed and unable to do well academically because of their poor command of English.

Most of these young people said they had taught themselves to read Hmong (they use Hmong hymnals in church), but that they write (for example to friends in other states) only in English.

One student said, "Sure we learn English in school. But when we come home nobody speaks English. Even the little kids - they don't speak English." But another said that they use a mixture of three languages - English and Hmong and Lao. Another student said that they learn a lot of English by watching TV - especially vocabulary.

All of the students at the young people's meeting said they study in front of the TV - "during the commercials." One said that there is so much "togetherness" in Hmong families that she couldn't study until the rest of the family were asleep. Some girls said that they were expected to help with preparing food and tending the children, so they had little time for studying. The boys, the girls said, had a big advantage because they had no responsibilities and also could come and go as they pleased.

One problem in Fort Smith as elsewhere has been the student who comes to America as a teenager with little formal education. If such students reach the age of 20 without graduating from high school, they are moved into adult education to study for the GED. On the other hand, the schools have tried to be flexible to meet the students' needs. There is a 19-year-old Hmong boy in the seventh grade, where he is the slowest math student in his class. A 14-year-old Hmong boy in the class is working with him to improve his math.

Students' Concerns

The Hmong students at the young people's meeting said that they have some

American friends at school, and since they go to neighborhood schools they meet the same people outside of school. But their parents have different attitudes about dating and some school activities than the American students' parents do, and that separates them from their American friends, or causes conflicts between the students and their parents.

Some boys have gotten involved in soccer and other sports at school. If the girls want to watch the games, they have to go with their parents. One girl said she was not allowed to go to dances. But when her father found out that her brother had sneaked out to attend a dance, he said nothing.

Another girl told us:

> We can't have dates like Americans. Every Friday night my American friends have dates. Sometimes an American guy asks me, "You want to go out with me?" I say "yes." But when I come home my dad says "No. You can't go. You're different." He always says that. He says, "You're different from the Americans. You can't like an American." But my older sister married an American. He said that's enough, already his oldest daughter is gone to Americans. My parents want to keep the girls away from the boys. If a girl goes out with a guy for even one night, she's going to get trouble from her parents.

Some of the Hmong students have part-time jobs after school. One Hmong girl, a senior, was attending classes in the morning and was employed by the schools as a bilingual teacher's aide in the afternoon, providing help for the other Hmong students. Although school officials didn't know this, after school she was going to the poultry plant to work a full night shift from 4 p.m. to midnight, getting only three or four hours' sleep before returning to school the next morning.

Education vs. Marriage and Children

Only three Hmong students have dropped out of the Fort Smith schools. They

were three sisters all of whom got married the same year. Two went to Utah where they are said to be in school. The other joined her husband's family in Little Rock. A teacher said that if other Hmong teenagers are married, they are living with their parents and still in school.

The Hmong students attending the young people's meeting expressed great concern about issues related to parental control, dating, arranged marriage, and the role of women in Hmong society.

The girls stated that they are given little freedom by their parents. They are not allowed to date like other students of their age, especially with non-Hmong, and the parents often decide whom they are to marry, on the basis of political considerations and with little regard to the girl's feelings. So they may have no choice but to marry. On the other hand if they do have permission to marry someone they love, they feel that they can't afford to pass up the chance, so they marry young. And they admitted that some young people marry to escape their parents' control of their lives.

> Sometimes if you love a guy and you don't want to marry him it's hard to find someone as good as him to love. Sometimes your parents find someone for you to marry. The parents just don't care about your schooling. They just like that guy and you just have to marry him.

But the girls also felt that in a Hmong marriage the wife is expected to obey her husband more than in American marriages. Even if she works, the Hmong wife and mother is responsible for all of the cooking, cleaning and child care. One girl said:

> It's real different. You have to obey your husband - everything he says. But still it's better than being a daughter. I think. But I don't know. I'm not married. If my husband tells me to take off his shoes, then that's what I have to do.

Asked about wives that work, one girl gave this reply:

> Yes, now it's changing. Sometimes the husband stays home. But when the wife comes home, nobody helps her take off her shoes. She does that by herself.

Another girl said:

> If your father wants you to do something, you can't reject. The boys can get away with disobeying their parents. But never the girls. Our parents say, "We are older. We know better than you." Sometimes they do know better than us, but sometimes they don't.

Students' Aspirations and Plans

The students at the meeting did not articulate many plans for the future. Some talked vaguely about going to college, others about marriage and children.

A Hmong leader said that, in the Hmong way, the young people look to the elders for advice. He said that the leaders advise them according to the needs of the community. In keeping with the community's plans, young people are urged to study agriculture and business. The leaders expect, he said, that 20% of those graduating from high school will take jobs and 80% will go on to college.

When those attending the young people's meeting were asked directly how many would like to go to college, a girl said:

> For the girl it's very hard because we're expected to stay home and do the work and the boy will go to school.

Discussing the community's plans for farming, some Hmong leaders said that they wanted to locate close enough to town so that the young people would be able to go to good schools and to take jobs in town (while living at the farm) if they didn't wish to become farmers.

Higher Education

The Fort Smith area has very limited resources for higher education. There is no four-year college in the vicinity. The nearest is the state university at Fayetteville, an hour's drive away. The local area is served by Westark Community College, a two-year public institution, and by one or two small busi-

ness colleges.

In the spring of 1983 only one student in Fort Smith had gone on to study in college after graduating from high school. He was attending a business college, preparing himself, at his father's request, to handle accounting for an eventual Hmong business. This student, after not making very good grades in high school, seemed to be succeeding in his management courses. He said the reason he was allowed to go to college instead of working was that his sister, who had also graduated from high school, had taken a job in the "chicken factory."

One girl in Fort Smith, a junior in high school, said she wants to be a doctor. Her father was trained as a "practical" doctor in Laos, and is an unlicensed midwife now. Her father told us that she had gotten very good grades in Salt Lake City but has done less well in high school in Fort Smith.

One young man has been accepted as a student at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, and was to begin in the fall of 1983. He is interested in agriculture, but also in computer science. The young woman who as a senior was working as a teacher's aide and also in the poultry plant, will be one of the teacher aides hired under the District's new bilingual program in the fall. She was also planning to pursue business courses in the evening.

F. Adult ESL

Extent of ESL Instruction Received

Eighteen of thirty-five men attending the meeting of household heads reported that they had received ESL instruction at some time prior to coming to Fort Smith. Thus it may be concluded that nearly half of Hmong household heads have never received formal instruction in English. None had received ESL

instruction in Fort Smith. (One local man later indicated, in an interview, that he was attending morning clases at the ABE Center.) Asked if they would like to have additional English instruction, all said they would.

Among the women attending the women's meeting, none were currently studying ESL. (Again one woman said in an interview later that she was enrolled in ESL at the ABE Center.) The women at the meeting said they work and take care of their families and have no time for classes. The women were not asked whether they had previously had ESL instruction. But it appeared from the interviews that probably only about fifty percent had.

In subsequent discussion one of the women asked if the government could provide classes so that they could learn English - this despite the fact that the local ABE program offers a variety of classes for refugees, as described above. In various discussions, most Hmong seemed to agree that people felt too tired and too busy after work to study or attend class. Some suggested that the best time for a class for Hmong adults would be Saturday afternoon. The coordinator of ESL classes for ABE indicated that it would be difficult to find someone to teach at that time.

Hmong Experiences with Learning English

The following reports of ESL experiences and ideas on learning English were gleaned from individual interviews.

One man, who holds an assembly line job, said he had studied ESL in California for a year. He would like to have job training, but his English isn't good enough to handle a formal course. Both he and his wife would like to study English again, he said, because they know that their poor command of English is holding them back for both jobs and training. They would like to be

able to make job applications without help.

A young family head studied ESL and "living skills" two hours a day during his first year in California, before he got a job. Since then he has had no ESL, and he feels his English is very poor. Because of his weak educational background, he finds that he learns English very slowly. But, he says, if there were a convenient ESL class he would go. He has always dreamed of being a carpenter. But to study carpentry he would have to improve his English first. For this reason, he is inclined to give up on that dream and find a way to live and work with other Hmong as much as possible so he will not need to use English.

A man near 40 studied ESL for about eight months in 1978. The class met for three hours a day and included refugees of all ages and ethnic backgrounds. He feels he didn't learn much because he was too old and he had too many family problems on his mind. The best way for him to learn English, he said, was by trying to communicate with other workers when he was employed by an American friend. One of the things he considered in moving out of California was that, unable to read, write, or speak English, he wasn't going to be able to get along there. He hoped in Arkansas to establish a rural life for which language abilities would be less important. But now, he said, he would like to learn more; to be able, for example, to fill out applications, tax returns, etc., without assistance.

Another older man said that in Illinois an American teacher came to his house one hour a week to teach him English. He would like to study English in Fort Smith too. But for him the best way to learn would be by working in a factory where there are no Hmong or Lao and one has to speak English. Or by having American friends. But he asked:

> How do you make friends? How do you get American friends to visit? And how can you have friends if you don't speak well and your house is dirty and you don't have any money to make it nice?

This man does in fact have one American friend, a man who at one time worked in Laos, living nearby in Oklahoma. Since the family never speaks English at home, finding it easier always to use Hmong, they decided that the best way for their only child to learn English was to live with the American friend's family. That way he would have someone to help him with his homework and a family with whom he could practice speaking English.

An elderly woman, a widow, reported that she had taken a Hmong literacy class in California, five days a week for five months, and learned to read and write Hmong. She left the class only when she moved to Arkansas. She would like to study English now; it would make her life happier, she said. But when she tries to learn English, she can't remember the word or sentence the next day. She also said:

> Sometimes I watch Arkansas Educational Television. I try to catch the words. I can understand what they say, but I can't speak. I know what I want to say. I almost can dream the words in English. But they won't come to my mouth. I can listen and understand but not speak.

At their church, on Sunday mornings, the Hmong community have organized classes in Hmong literacy. Some Hmong interviewed said they would like to learn to read Hmong first, and then English.

The Hmong adults in Fort Smith apparently have little opportunity to practice speaking English with American friends or co-workers.

The majority who work in the poultry plants reportedly speak Hmong on the job and are not spoken to by supervisors except when terse orders are given. Thus they do not have the opportunity to improve their English through practice

on the job. Some reported that they know less English now than when they finished their ESL classes in California.

Members of the Hmong church were asked whether they had any joint activities with the Christian church congregation whose building they use for Sunday services.

"No," a Hmong leader said, "the most they could do was to let us share the church. It's just a business arrangement. They let us hold our Sunday School and church services there when they are finished on Sundays, and we pay half of the utility bills."

Asked whether members of the American congregation had helped them in any way, such as offering tutoring in English, the man said, "No. They don't even say 'hello' when we pass" (in the church parking lot on Sunday mornings).

With few American friends, no volunteer tutoring or literacy program, and little contact with English through their employment, and feeling unable to find time to attend ESL classes at the times they are offered, it seems unlikely that Hmong adults in Fort Smith will make much progress in overcoming their language handicap.

Hmong Views of ESL Instruction

The Hmong interviewed for this report had a number of comments about the way English is taught.

An older man, who said he has worked since he came to the U.S. and had little instruction in English, asserted that in this country English is important for everyone, including the Hmong. But teachers should use the right technique, he said, not the usual ESL methods. The teacher should start by having the students memorize the alphabet and by teaching literacy. The teacher should

have the students learn to say and understand each word as they go, even if they only do three words in an hour. The usual practice in ESL classes, he has heard, is for the teacher to read the book and have the students read it back, a page at a time. Or the teacher puts words on the board for the class to read, but too many at a time.

A woman said that the most important thing for the teacher is to go slow, to spend enough time on one sentence so that students are sure of it before going on. On the other hand, she said, teachers sometimes go too slow, teaching the same thing over and over when the students have already learned it.

In the group meeting a man said, "The teachers need to go word by word over the lessons and have each student say the words. When the teacher reads the lesson, that's no good. We don't catch the words."

Another man gave this criticism:

> We know how to read a little, but when we read something we don't know the meanings of a lot of the words. When we were in the ABE ESL program in Fort Smith our teacher was a Vietnamese. She used the American method: the teacher reads and then the students read. We can say it but we don't know the meaning. The teacher would explain what it meant, but she explained the whole page, not the individual words. She would explain words to the Vietnamese students in their language, if they asked, but the Hmong of course didn't understand. So in ESL we need more help in learning vocabulary. And we should have Hmong teachers.

A leader of the Hmong in Fort Smith, fluent in English himself, said that the Hmong find ESL classes boring. He complained that the teachers keep going through "This is an apple, that is a banana," instead of teaching useful sentences, such as "I would like to have a job. I want to work with my hands."

IV. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SITE: HIGHLIGHTS AND WHAT WAS LEARNED

A. The Uniqueness of the Community

The Hmong community in Fort Smith, Arkansas, numbering fifty-five families in March 1983, appears to be unique in a number of ways. It exists entirely as the result of planned secondary migration. All have moved to Fort Smith from other parts of the country, especially Southern California. Nearly all share a common philosophy and purpose. They have chosen to break away from dependence on public assistance and to attempt to begin a new self-sufficient life, supporting themselves through jobs and if possible, in the future, their own businesses and farms. They are highly unified. Nearly all share the same Hmong dialect and the same Christian faith, and come from the same region of Laos. Nearly all are related to one another by blood or marriage. At present they all share something more: poverty.

The Move From Public Assistance. Although the migration of Hmong to Fort Smith did not take place all at once as a result of a single group decision, it has been guided by a common philosophy. Members of the community recognized the dangers of prolonged dependence on government support. They realized that in most locations older people and those who don't speak English well - the majority of adults - cannot expect to find jobs adequate to support their families. They shared a dream of re-establishing a self-sufficient rural lifestyle, in which all will be able to contribute to the family's livelihood, regardless of age, education, or language abilities. They all were persuaded that in Arkansas, with its relatively inexpensive housing and land, with entry-level jobs available, and with less government regulation than in other states, they

might be able to establish the life they hope for. The secondary migration began in 1979, but the majority of Hmong now in Fort Smith have come since 1981.

Employment. Whatever their expectations, it has turned out that, under recent economic conditions, with limited proficiency in English on the part of some, and with perceived job discrimination, the Hmong have not found adequate employment in Fort Smith. Although nearly all households have at least one wage-earner, the great majority are employed in unpleasant jobs which generally offer less than full-time work, at minimum or near-minimum wage, with no benefits such as health insurance. Because none receive public assistance other than food-stamps, those who have no employment must be supported by other members of the community. Many families have large bills to pay for maternity care and illness. Most seem to have barely enough to make rent and car payments and to feed their families. All appear to be under considerable stress from worry about bills and possible lay-offs. Those who have poultry-processing jobs are distressed by the work itself and especially the inhumane way they feel they are treated as workers.

Unity and Initiative. Despite the discouragements, the Hmong in Fort Smith seem to be sustained in part by their common Christian faith. They meet together several hours each week for worship, Bible study, and prayer. The Church sponsors Hmong literacy classes. The community has also recently formed an affiliate of Lao Family Community, Inc. Some Fort Smith Hmong families jointly own rural land where they grow food crops, lease other land on which livestock are raised, and own a number of cows and pigs. Hmong women have begun selling their needlework (pa ndau) locally. With a strong, unified leadership

the community may be able to realize its goal of developing business and farming enterprises. The main obstacles are the lack of capital and the pervasive poverty of the members of the community, on the one hand, and, on the other, a lack of contact with and support from the larger community in which they live.

B. Job Skills and Proficiency in English

Some members of the Fort Smith Hmong community possess valuable job skills. Among them are persons who were military officers, government officials and nurses in Laos. Several held good-paying jobs in the U.S. before coming to Fort Smith. A few have received job training in the U.S., especially in furniture making and maintenance work. But they have been almost completely excluded from desirable employment in Fort Smith. The reasons appear to be the general level of unemployment, discrimination in hiring, and their generally low level of competence in English. Only in the poultry industry have persons with low English proficiency been hired.

Although at least half received some ESL training soon after arrival in the U.S., most are still unable to complete application forms or interview for jobs without assistance. ESL classes for refugees are offered at various times and locations by the local State-funded service provider, yet currently only one of the women and a handful of men are attending classes. They say that they are too tired after work, the classes are not conveniently scheduled, and there are transportation and child-care problems. Very little communication in English exists on the job in the environments where nearly all of the Hmong work, which means the workers are unlikely to learn much English on the job.

C. Health Care and Medical Expenses

One of the most serious problems for the Hmong community in Fort Smith is

health care. Only a few persons have jobs in companies that provide health insurance coverage. No low-cost or subsidized medical care is available. Prenatal care and hospital delivery of a baby costs over $1000, an amount most cannot afford. As a result, many families are heavily in debt to health care providers, and many medical problems go unattended. Some mothers do not come in for prenatal care until the eighth month if at all, and some are giving birth at home without a licensed midwife or doctor.

D. Economic Development

The community leaders in Fort Smith have developed fairly concrete plans for economic development, involving labor-intensive farming and food processing and marketing. The labor force is readily available to do the necessary work. The Hmong feel that community members have all the skills they might need for any phase of the operation. But they lack two things necessary to initiate these projects: contacts with key members of the American community and the know-how and assistance they could provide, and the capital needed for purchase or lease of land, machinery, building materials, seed, etc.

Community Acceptance and Assistance. One very important factor affecting the Hmong in Fort Smith is their social and political isolation from the American community. This isolation is much greater than in other communities where the Hmong have resettled, and it would seem to affect them negatively in several areas of their lives - learning English, getting and holding jobs, acts of hostility and vandalism against them, and the furthering of their economic development plans.

The very coherence and determination to become economically independent

which is a great strength of the community is at the same time a contributor to this isolation. Because they left American sponsors when they migrated to Fort Smith, there are no Americans locally (other than the family that helped them move from California) who feel a personal responsibility for their well-being. Unlike other Christian Hmong who have received large amounts of assistance from American churches, these Hmong, having their own independent congregation, receive no support from this cultural bond with Americans.

We have emphasized in this report that the Hmong in Fort Smith are like a colony - an isolated outpost with few connections locally but with strong ties to their compatriots elsewhere. While they would like to practice speaking English, they have few English-speaking friends. The Hmong complain of being turned away from jobs they can do, but they do not have the advocates or intermediaries who could help employers to see them as legitimate members of the local community. They suffer from vandalism against their rural property, but they are absentee landholders who have never mended fence with or stopped by to meet their neighbors. It seems likely that there are untapped wells of friendship, neighborliness, and generosity in the community, if a way could be found to bridge the gap between their partially self-imposed isolation and the social conservatism of the American community they have chosen to live in.

The specific embodiments of their dream for the future show it to be, to some extent, a dream of returning to the old life in Laos - to live in a village apart from others, to engage all members of the family, especially the elders, in farming, to raise chickens and pigs and grow rice, to be able to use their native language for most day-to-day purposes. But their plans are not out of touch with reality. They have recently begun to seek advice from Americans,

including county agricultural extension agents, on the potential for various crops and the marketing possibilities for crops and livestock. They have drawn up detailed plans for the organization and layout of a poultry processing plant of their own. They want their children to be well educated, and they assume that the younger generation will aspire to a variety of jobs outside their own community.

Financial Assistance for Economic Development. The Hmong in Fort Smith are not opposed to assistance from the American government and the American public. On the contrary they now feel that only with such assistance, at the outset, can their plans for economic self-sufficiency be realized. What they do greatly resent is that the federal and state governments seem willing, in some regions, to pour an endless flow of cash into welfare for the poor, including the Hmong, while at the same time the government has been unwilling or unable to provide the small amount of pump-priming they need in order to make a new self-sufficient life for themselves in Fort Smith.

(Since the field work for this report was conducted, the Hmong in Fort Smith, through their Lao Family Community organization, have received a grant from the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement's Highland Lao Initiative to train Hmong in American farming methods and for assistance in job development.)

E. Summary and Outlook

The principal strengths of the Hmong community in Fort Smith include:

1) unity, cooperation, and sharing within the Hmong community;

2) a high level of employment and no welfare dependence;

3) a mutual assistance association to focus development efforts and to interact with the outside community;

4) accomplishments in economic development: land, gardens, livestock, and a federally funded project to train farmers;

5) well-defined community goals and plans;

6) community members who have useful skills and experience and a willingness to work hard to achieve goals.

The major problems facing the community seem to be these:

1) family incomes that are insufficient to pay medical bills or to provide capital for pursuing economic development goals;

2) inability to obtain jobs commensurate with job skills and income requirements;

3) insufficient means of developing English language proficiency and work experience needed to obtain better-paying jobs;

4) isolation from sources of support and assistance in the larger community, including publicly funded programs.

5) lack of public awareness of who the Hmong are and lack of community acceptance, extending reportedly to employment discrimination, verbal abuse, and vandalism.

For those already in Fort Smith this is a crucial time. Some have already reached a state of desperation. Some outside assistance, in the form of job development or technical assistance and capital for farming, appears to be critically needed if they are to survive and thrive under present economic conditions. There is talk of resigning themselves to failure and returning to welfare dependence in another state, or of staging a protest to the government or to the United Nations, and even of suicide. Whether their experiment in refugee-initiated planned migration and economic development, and their goal of freedom from the bonds of dependence on public welfare, will ultimately succeed is still very much in doubt.

Friends and relatives around the country have expressed an interest in leaving states where they are subsisting on welfare to join the Hmong community in Fort Smith. For the moment they are telling these people not to come, until there are better jobs or their economic development plans can be realized.

In the summer of 1983 one of our Hmong informants was asked for an assessment of whether the Hmong colony in Fort Smith will succeed. He said that the community was going ahead with its plans and efforts for economic development insofar as possible with available means. But he stated that there are two factors that might force them to abandon their plans and leave Fort Smith. They would have to leave, he said, if the better-paying jobs in the community continued to be out of their grasp, or if their efforts at farming are thwarted by the hostility of rural neighbors, reflected in recent acts of vandalism. At present, he asserted, eighty percent of the Hmong community in Fort Smith are discouraged and ready to give up.

ADDRESSING OF MEETING
BETWEEN THE HMONG COMMUNITY'S
LEADERS AND THE SOUTHEAST ASIA REFUGEE STUDIES
GROUP IN FORT SMITH, ARKANSAS

INTRODUCTION:

-As is the custom of the Hmong Community in Fort Smith, we will start our meeting with a prayer. Mr. Pao Tong Her will lead us in prayer.
-Introduction.

DISCUSSION:

Gentlemen, I am very happy to have all of you here today. As you know, we are here to welcome our special guests: Dr. Bruce Downing, an Associate Professor from the University of Minnesota; John Finck from the Rhode Island Office of Refugee Resettlement; Xeu Vang Vangyi, the Director of Lao-Family Community and Mr. Dang Van De from the Texas Office of Refugee Resettlement.

We, as the leaders of the Hmong Community in Fort Smith, Arkansas are very happy to welcome you to this city. We are greatful that you are spending some of your valuable time visiting us, one of the smallest group of Hmong refugees in the United States. Your visit here means so much to us and gives us encouragement in the face of the many problems we have faced in the past and are facing at this time. Because of these many problems and the seeming lack of solution to these problems, we often feel abandoned by both our leaders and the American Government.

SHORT STORY OF HMONG RESETTLEMENT IN FORT SMITH:

During the year 1976-78, The family of Tom and Jane Ashworth lived in California and helped many Hmong families develop basic day to day living skills. Mr. Ashworth even started a small business to help keep three of our families off welfare. However, during late 1978 the Ashworths moved to Fort Smith, Arkansas, their original hometown. For us this was a tragic loss. We felt that we had no one to turn to. About one year later, two of our families who were living on welfare in California decided to move near the Ashworths in Fort Smith. During the next year and a half these families often communicated with families and friends in California. It was learned that these two families had lived in Arkansas without any federal, state or local assistance. Additionally, they with the help of the Ashworths had purchased two nice homes about one year after moving to Fort Smith. This change in the lives of these two families surprised us greatly. We felt that if they could do something to improve their lives, we could do the same thing and accomplish as much as they had. We then decided to pay a visit. We are very surprised when we visited Arkansas. The land, the green vegetation, the forests and mountain, the farms and especially the weather were similiar to our homeland. The people in Arkansas were much friendlier and more pleasant to be around than those in some other areas where we had lived. Additionally, the cost of living was much lower than in California. After we had evaluated our information and held many discussions, we started to move to Arkansas

during May 1981. Others have moved from states such as Oklahoma, Illinois and Utah. Now we have 55 families and 296 people in the Fort Smith Hmong Community.